



**Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation
Office of Deaf Services**

**Tips For Easier Communication With People
Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing**

A person with a hearing loss in your service is a challenge. The following tips will help you serve these people better.

Eye Contact and Facial Expressions. Eye contact and facial expressions are very important in Deaf Culture. If one doesn't look at the person who is deaf or hard of hearing while talking to them, that person will feel that the person who is hearing is not interested in what they are saying. Conversely, the person who is deaf needs to be watching the face and body language of the person speaking to them in order to fully comprehend what is being said.

Hand Waving and Foot Stomping. When people who are deaf wave their hands or stomp their feet, it is often an indication of their desire to get your attention so that they may convey what it is they need. This is very common in Deaf Culture and should not be seen as an indication of the maturity of the person who is deaf. If, however, the person continues to exhibit one or both of these behaviors while you have already acknowledged them and are looking at them attentively, you have the right to reprimand the behavior. Explain why you are reprimanding the behavior through the use of writing or an interpreter.

Lip-reading. People who are deaf or hard of hearing who possess a greater command of English will more likely be able to lip-read (or speechread) with some proficiency than those with less English skills. Only 25-30% of all speech is visible on the lips. There are many words which look the same on the lips. To demonstrate this point, look in the mirror and say these two phrases: "Island view" and "I love you". The two phrases look identical on the lips. Comprehension of lip-reading will be based on one's mastery of English and knowledge of the topic that is being discussed. Don't depend solely on lip-reading with any deaf person or hard of hearing person. Supplement your speech with written words, or use an interpreter, or sign if you have the ability to do so.

If you are working with a person who has recently become deafened, they most likely will not have knowledge of sign language, nor the ability to lip-read. With these people, communication is usually through written words. Take time to write out what you would say as if you were talking to a hearing person. Consider alternative approaches such as using a laptop to type or even engaging the services of a captioner.

Written Communication. As mentioned above, there are times when it will be necessary to write notes to a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. While it may be a necessity, writing does pose some problems. Specifically, writing is time consuming and may tempt the writer to abbreviate the amount of information exchanged. Remember, too, that some people who are deaf or hard of hearing read and write better than others. The average reading level of a person who is prelingually deaf is third to fifth grade. Try to avoid the temptation to shorten your message to make up for the slowness of the method, allow sufficient time for the Deaf person to grasp the importance of your message, and to ask questions if more explanation is needed. If one is going to go into a long, lengthy discussion, it is wise to secure the services of a sign language interpreter to get more detailed information across and make communication transpire more smoothly. Most of all, try to be patient and understanding.

Visual Environments. Visual factors are critical in maximizing communication with a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. Be sensitive to this by adjusting lighting and using visual rather than auditory cues and reassurances.

Use charts or pictures when explaining information and procedures to consumers who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The Office of Deaf Services is responsible for developing and implementing programs that meet the linguistic and cultural needs of DMH/MR's consumers who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Services are designed to be affirmative and supporting to consumers who traditionally have not been able to benefit from services offered by the department.

Don't take eye glasses away from a person who is deaf or hard of hearing

Sensitivity to the special needs of people with hearing aids requires the staff to:

- Always allow the person to wear the hearing aid.
- Be sure the person has fully understood what has been said by asking questions or having them repeat back what was said.

Further tips for communicating more effectively with consumers who are deaf or hard of hearing:

- When a person with hearing loss is admitted, notify the Office of Deaf Services (or you staff communication specialist) and request assistance. In particular a communication assessment should be done. Keep a copy of the recommendations in the consumer's chart and refer to it.
- Never call the consumer "deaf and dumb". If you note the person's hearing loss in the file, be certain it says "hard of hearing" or "deaf". Use designation preferred by the consumer.
- Supplement your speech, even when talking with a person who speech-reads well. Supplement by finger spelling, signing, or writing key words or phrases.
- Make cards of common expressions. You can point to a card that says "How are you feeling?", "Are you hungry?" etc. Be creative. Remember, these cards are to help get through times when an interpreter is not present.
- Keep pen and paper handy. You will use lots of paper, so it might be helpful to keep a clipboard near by. Secure the pen to it so that people (both hearing and deaf!) do not walk away with the pen.
- Learn a few simple "survival" signs. Keep a sign language chart and finger spelling chart handy, and read it during your coffee break. Have a "Sign of the Day" poster and keep it updated.
- When working with a person who is deaf or hard of hearing and who is older or has poor vision, write or draw using a marker-type pen and write a bit larger than you usually would.
- In in-patient settings, assign people who are deaf or hard of hearing to rooms where they can see what is going on around them. A room opposite the nurses' station or near the television lounge is ideal. Hearing loss tends to isolate people, and being put near the center of activity will increase their comfort and awareness of surroundings.
- Turn the captions on when the television is on. This will enable the person who is deaf to share in the social activities surrounding television, assuming the program being viewed is captioned.
- If you are meeting with a Deaf person and you are called out, don't leave the room without informing the person that you are leaving and if possible why.
- Don't shout at a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. While this is a natural tendency, it does not improve the person's ability to understand you.